DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 122 617 FL 007 616

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TITLE Gesticulation: A Plan of Classification.
PUB DATE 28 Dec 75
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the meeting of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (57th, December 28, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Body Language; Classification; Communication (Thought Transfer); Idioms; *Manual Communication; Metaphors; *Nonverbal Communication; Paralinguistics; Sign Language; *Social Behavior
IDENTIFIERS *Gestures

ABSTRACT

People take their folk gestures seriously, which is illustrated in the fact that several folk gestures, such as raising the right hand and kissing the Bible, are used in religious and legal ceremonies. These and other gestures, such as making the sign of the cross and knocking on wood, are folk gestures used today which have their roots in early religion and tradition. Gestures include "official" types used by the deaf and dumb, American Indians or sports referees; military salutes; and gestures communicating fear, anger, friendship, scorn, etc. Nervous or autistic gestures are widespread. Ethnographers, sociologists, psychologists and others study gestures to determine their origins and significance. Tribal or political gestures and salutes can unite people or create enemies. The picture writing of American Indians, Egytian hieroglyphics and Chinese written characters may have their origins in gestures. Numerous English words and metaphoric idioms reflect gestures: "highbrow, bootlicker, holding one's head high, pricking up one's ears, keeping a stiff upper lip," etc. A practical classification of gestures might include: (1) fold gestures - shaking the head for a negative, pointing, shaking a fist in defiance, etc.; (2) technical gestures - sign language of the deaf or of North American Indians, umpire signalling, etc.; (3) autistic or nervous gestures, such as doodling, fiddling with an object in the hand, etc. A few resource works are recommended for those interested in studying gestures. (CHK)

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GESTICULATION: A PLAN OF CLASSIFICATION

All people everywhere take their folk gestures seriously. Take the case of swearing-in new citizens, for example, which I witnessed in the Gainesville, Florida Federal Court Room. When the federal judge entered the courtroom, we were all instructed to rise. This gesture of respect, not for the man, but for what he represents, the dignity and majesty of the government, is impressive. Even more impressive is the swearing of allegiance. A member of the court gives careful instructions that one must raise his RIGHT hand and NOT his left. And that ladies wearing gloves must remove the glove from the right hand. In some states, one has to "kiss the Bible" to make his testimony legal, the testimony of an atheist being unacceptable formerly, and perhaps still so in some Southern states. Where modern ideas of sanitation abolished this custom, it is a requirement to "touch the Bible." This gesture has its counterpart in some Mohammedan countries, where it is obligatory to touch the Koran, or sacred beads, before giving testimony. In our own country, the president himself must be sworn-in with two folk gestures before he may receive his vast powers: he must raise his right hand and he must kiss the Holy Bible. Religion, politics, and folklore all wrapped in one package.

I repeat that we take our folk gestures very seriously, and we use them even in religious ritual, thus thrusting them up to a cosmic scale of importance. A few years ago, when the Reverend John Branscomb of Orlando, Florida, became a Methodist Bishop, the church authorities consecrated him

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by "the laying on of the hands:" as he knelt (kneeling in ritual is also a gesture), four high churchmen placed the palm of their right hands (notice NOT the left) on his hand.

Among practicing Catholics "the sign of the cross" may be used many times a day. I have friends who make the sign of the cross when setting out on a trip, for example. In Spain and in South America, I have seen the triple use of the sign of the cross, made before the forehead against evil thoughts; before the lips it's assistance against swearing, gossip. and lies; and before the heart it helps against iniquitous feelings. Even so, this same gesture may be employed for the relatively trivial purpose of the recovery of feeling in an arm or a leg that has gone to sleep, or before the mouth when yawning, presumably originally to keep out evil spirits.

Aside from religious gestures, we use many others. In America and in Europe "we knock on wood" (tocamos madera) to ward off bad luck, usually on the heels of telling about some good luck we've had: my guess concerning its origin -- and it's only a guess -- is that we are still propitiating some ancient tree god. Still, in Turkey, you don't knock on wood, but instead pull the lobe of the ear and click your tongue, as you repeat a little formula, with the same purpose for which we knock on wood. The little formula, translated from the Turkish, means, "I'm pouring hot lead in the ear of the devil."

Because in our day so many Americans go abroad, I'm sure that some of you in this audience have SEEN manifested the dread fear of "the evil eye" that is current in Italy, Greece and the Near East. Jobs are lost,

chandeliers fall, babies sicken, trains become derailed, and other dire results are thought to be brought about by the evil-eye, a centuries-old folk gesture. The protection against it, of course, is another folk gesture, the sign of the horns or the sign of the fig. You fight fire with fire. If you read "Li'l Abner," you recognize the source of Al Capp's marvelous character, Evil-Eye Fleagle, capable of single-, double, and triple- whammies. The triple-whammy will dissolve a battle ship into thin air. An awesome belief in the Old World becomes material for a caricature through the genius of an American cartoonist, Al Capp, in the New.

If we place some folk gestures high in our scale of values, we employ others playfully. In the U. S. A. if two children say the same words at the same moment, they link their little fingers and say, "Pins and needles." In Venezuela, I was told, children also link their little fingers for the same reason, but they say "Cervantes." The purpose of the magic of this gesture is to prevent ensuing discord which otherwise may come between the two friends. In the U. S. one may not point with his finger, presumably for reasons of etiquette. But "Don't point" as a strict rule to follow turns up in other parts of the world and for varying reasons. In Japan it is considered gross to point with your foot. In Kenya, West Africa, and in Central America, pointing is tabu; so, in order to point out an object, they protrude their lips. Formerly it was believed in certain parts of the South, as well as in a region of England, that if you pointed at a grave, your finger would drop off. Fortunately, you could break the spell by thrusting the offending finger into

water, or into the ground, but quickly, for time is of the essence, Pointing at a grave may even cause death unless you spit on the offending finger. Some used to believe that the finger would get cut off; it was risky business to point at graves. Amy Vanderbilt's rule "don't ever point," in American etiquette, probably originated in a superstition

Venezuelan children conduct an attractive little ritual for this occasion: they see which one can pinch the other first, then knock on wood and say, "Un pellizco para ti, felicidad para mí." Also in Venezuela children who see something red "grasp it" in gestural make-believe and hold it tightly to throw at the first dog that passes by. If no dog appears, a small fist may be held clenched for some time.

I find it perplexing that such a natural and fundamentally inoffensive act as pointing with the finger be disapproved, and even rebuked, in many parts of the world.

Any attempt to catalog the gestures of mankind I think would flounder. One would have to collect and classify the gestures of the deaf and dumb, of the North American Indians, of football referees, workers in radio stations, baseball catchers, sailors, train conductors, tobacco auctioneers, and actors; and if you add to all these more or less "technical" gestures the Nazi and Communist salutes, the magic gestures of Jamaican conjurers, of African medicine men, and gestures which communicate abhorrence, anger, affirmation, negation, fear, disapproval, mockery, obscenity, friendship, scorn, snobbery, shame, superstitution,

etc.; and then include the purely "autistic" or nervous gestures, or body movements, such as "doodling" or swinging a watch chain -- add up all of these and you have thousands of gestures.

Human gesticulation has been the object of study or comment from ancient times,[2] but since the 1880's interest in it has increased greatly. Garrick Mallery, with his Sign Language Among North American Indians (1881), appears to have stirred up enthusiasm for the study of gestures, for since the publication of his work, ethnographers, sociologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, anthropologists, art students, drama students, and to some extent linguists, have dedicated time, thought, and articles, and books to the subject.[3]

What have been some of their objectives? The psychologist wants to know specifically what nervous and autistic gestures mean. What precipitates our waving the hands so much in conversations, clearing the throat, forced coughing? These actions are present where there seems to be no specific or understandable stimulation which would throw light on their appearance. They challenge the attention of the student of human behavior. Possibly no gesture is ever accidental.[4] So much for the psychologist's viewpoint. Others are of equal interest. William Mead Prince, nationally known illustrator, when I asked him some years ago the part gesture plays in American illustrations, replied emphatically, "Everything!"

In painting and sculpture, many details escape the eye of an observer unaware of the numerous gestures in common usage during the artist's lifetime.[5]

Modern advertisers are as dependent on gesticulation as illustrators. Occasionally they picture innocent American gestures which turn out to be obscene in foreign countries, especially in Hispanic America. I have been told that one of the early Walt Disney films had to be revised because of a gesture innocent in the United States but in Cuba coarse and offensive.[6]

In social psychology, suppose the researcher's intention is to throw light on the curious mass appeal of the Fascist and Communist salutes. How did it come about to cite a case, that in the frenzied Spain of 1936-39, when two Spanish soldiers saw each other at a distance, if one threw up a stiff right arm, palm forward (the Fascist salute), while the other thrust up a bent arm with clinched fist (the communist salute), each immediately got at the other's throat? (There were many actual cases according to Spanish refugees whom I met crossing the Atlantic en route to Mexico in 1936.) Some light is thrown on the problem by considering the similar use of gestures by the North American Indians. Ever so many Indian tribes had their tribal sign.[7] When two Indians met, the gestures they exchanged signalled help and sympathy or an intention to fight.[8]

Dictators who succeed in having tribal signs adopted in "civilized" Europe possibly owe their success to their subjects' latent atavistic inclinations. World War II brought out such mass frenzy in America that I

remember how unpleasant if not unsafe, it was not to stand up anywhere within earshot of God Save the King, La marseillaise, or The Star Spangled Banner. The act of rising was a patriotic gesture. A Jehovah's Witness in 1943 received a life sentence (later rescinded) for refusing to salute the American flag.[9]

But what of the philologist's use of gestures? Mallery and Tomkins in the 1800's established definitely that among the Sioux Indians gesture language and picture writing existed simultaneously, and that there was a close correspondence between the two.[10] Might not a study of contemporary Aztec gestures help to find the eagerly sought key to the meaning of the undeciphered picture-writing of the Aztec glyphs? In some cases the Sioux Indian picture-graphs do not at all reproduce the (human or animal) being represented, but rather the manual gesture which designated that being.

In Egyptian hieroglyphics there are many gesticulating figures; for example, a man putting his clustered finger tips to his lips meaning "to eat, eating, let's eat," a gesture Latins all know and many still use.

It is in Chinese, however, that we find one of the completest studies of the possible gestural origin of writing. Tchang Tcheng-Ming, in L'Écriture chinoise et le Geste humain, Paris, 1937, noted intimate relationships between Chinese gestures and Chinese writing. Hundreds of Chinese written characters contain symbols for hand, eyes, body, feet, or face, caught in the act of gestural communication. Tchang calls these characters gestes figés (frozen gestures). Combinations of Chinese symbols correspond to the parent combination of gestures. In Chinese, when you etymologize, your etymon frequently turns out to be a gesture.

The word for 'I' or 'one's self' is, in old Chinese, tseu, 'nose'. In China, to this day, when one designates himself, he puts his finger on the tip or the side of his nose instead of pointing to his chest, as we do in the Occident.

When praying, or when sitting down on haunches or kneeling for religious ritual, the Chinese always faced south. And so the Chinese symbol for "north" is the character representing a man's back. The word for friend is the character for two hands.

In English the idiom is the one element of our language which seems most closely to correspond (by way of gestural origin) to Chinese symbols. When we say "He's a back-slapper", our metaphorical meaning, like the extended meaning of Chinese characters, is the heart and soul of the phrase. Here English has an intriguing parallel with Chinese in that we can safely say that one of the prolific sources of English idiom is nothing less than the gesticulating body itself. Whole constellations of phrases and figures of speech have clustered about practically every part of the body--the head and its features, the arms, hands, fingers, the legs, feet and toes; all are put to vivid idiomatic use. If the origin of language itself remains a mystery, the origin of ever so many idioms derived from gestures is not. The following idioms bear this out:[11] to turn up one's nose; to hold one's head high; to tear one's hair; to pull a long face; to prick up one's ears; to keep a stiff upper lip; to bare one's teeth; to keep one's fingers crossed; to wash one's hands of (as Pilate); to hold one's ha' penny (cf. Die Faust in der Tasche ballen) = "to restrain one's self"; to grasp at the wind (Solomon); hand in hand; to pull for

someone (as at a football game); to look sheepish; the long and the short of it;[12] or on the one hand. . .on the other.[13]

There are, of course, meanings of words, too, of gestural origin:[14] highbrow; browbeater and glad (from Anglo-Saxon glæd meaning 'bright, shining'; is this not from the bright facial gesture of what we today call 'gladness'? The Oxford English Dictionary does not explain); faceless (obs., 'without spirit'); underhand (cf. the same idiom in Spanish, bajo mano.); bootlicker; that hang-dog look; Judas' kiss, etc.

Neither the New Oxford English Dictionary nor other great dictionaries I've seen consider these phrases from the point of view of gesticulation. Consequently, many of them go unexplained. I have a list of over 200 such phrases and words which seem to have originated from gestures. There are many more that need not go unexplained.

Since 1930 it has been the conviction of several European, Canadian, and North and South American scholars, that with few exceptions philologists who research the problems of language have laid too much stress on the oral to the exclusion of other observations.[15] Language, as the word itself implies, has been too closely identified with the tongue: French la langue, Spanish la lengua, Italian lingua, Portuguese língua, German Zunge, etc. It would seem to be high time to take into account that man has always used his entire body, not his tongue alone, to communicate with, and that consequently kinesics, now popularly called "body language," deserves attention. As the word significance itself indicates, communication by gestures may possibly antedate communication by speech. (latin, significare, significantia).

To date, I have collected about 1,000 gestures which I have classified as "folk gestures". It should be possible to collect many more of this type alone.

A practical (or workable) classification of gestures in general might include:

1. Folk gestures: shaking the head for a negative, shaking hands in greeting, shaking fist in defiance, pointing, etc.

2. Technical gestures: the sign language of the North American Indian, or that of the deaf [redacted]; semaphor signalling, umpire signaling, etc.

3. Autistic (or nervous) gestures: "doodling", opening and closing objects carried in the hand, shifting excessively before an audience, etc.

To illustrate my classification, I call on Joe Garagiola. First, as a youth at home in St. Louis, being Italian, he learned numerous Italian folk gestures that had crossed the Atlantic with his family; second, later as a grown man he became a catcher in big-league baseball, where he used a series of gestures agreed upon beforehand for signaling his pitcher: these were technical gestures; but in the third place, on any and all occasions, like you and me, he uses autistic (or nervous) gestures.

I recommend to lexicographers the examination of only one type of gesture at a time, for otherwise they enter an Okefenokee of body language and a new Babel of jargon. In order to keep abreast of gesture research in general, in 1957 I compiled a 100 page volume entitled GESTURES: A WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY, for the Southern Folklore Quarterly, published at the University of Florida. At that time my entanglement, studying in the Library

of Congress all types of gestures, was like trying to fence in a kitten. It caused a peck of trouble; I had to curtail the mind-reeling number of entries.

Even then, body-language research was on the march, adding a limitless number of items to the existing count of gesture articles and a newly-conceived Okeefenokese which bewildered me. I decided to essay folk gestures alone, for which I had prepared myself by having formally studied Folklore at Chapel Hill, under Ralph Boggs.

If you wish to enter into the study of Spanish body language allegro molto ma non troppo furioso closet yourself with Gerald R. Green's A Gesture Inventory for the Teaching of Spanish (Chilton Books, Philadelphia and New York, 1968). Be on your guard for the unscholarly works, however, such as Maude Poiret's Body Talk and Julian Fast's Body Language; some are tawdry, even meretricious. Ask your department to purchase the Lincoln Canfield gesture slides. And perhaps to retain proper caution about the whole business, keep before you the words of King Duncan in Macbeth I, 4: "There is no art to find the mind's construction in the face," spoken on the heels of manifest lèse majesté.

NOTES

1. In its original form this paper was read before the Philological Club of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It has been considerably modified. **In its present form it was read at the December meeting of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish & Portuguese in Chicago, 1975.**

2. Three of several good studies of the history of the study of gestures are Garrick Mallery, Sign Language Among the North American Indians, Washington, 1881; William Tomkins, The Universal Indian Sign Language, San Diego, California, 1929; and Jerald R. Green, A Gesture Inventory for the Teaching of Spanish, Chilton Books, Philadelphia/New York, 1968.

3. See F. C. Hayes, "Gestures: A Working Bibliography", Southern Folklore Quarterly, XXI (Dec. 1957), 218-316; Jerald R. Green, op. cit., 103-107.

4. Maurice H. Krout, in "Autistic Gestures", Psychological Monographs, XLVI, No. 4 (1935), suggests the possibility of a meaning behind every gesture of the body.

5. See, for example, Bartolomeo de Giovanni, "The Death of St. Jerome". (Acquavella Galleries); the "Dispute di S. Caterina", by Bernardino di Betto, 'il Pinturicchio', 1454-1513; and St. Catherine's manual gestures in her disputa, almost the chief point of interest. The manual gesture in the many pietas is of incalculable importance.

Andrea de Jorio, in La Mimica degli Antichi investigata nel Gestire Napoletano, Naples, 1832, says that the general system of gesture prevailing in ancient Italy is substantially the same as now observed, and that

an understanding of the existing language of gesture in Italy is an aid in the interpretation of the gestures on Greek vases and reliefs and sculpture.

6. I have a large collection of American, and some Hispanic American, advertisements. Most of the subjects pictured register joy, if not ecstacy, with the face, hands, and body, because they use the particular product advertised; or else they make gestures of pain and despair because of failure to purchase the product advertised.

One large ale company (Ballantine's) spent many thousand dollars on an advertising campaign to stimulate artificially the use of a well-known foreign gesture to mean, "Bring me a bottle of Ballantine's Ale". The gesture is made by putting the tops of the thumb and index of the right hand together and forming a small circle, while the other fingers are spread out fanwise. The hand is then held up front of the head. The campaign failed; folk gestures may rarely be artificially initiated.

7. Garrick Mallery, op. cit., p. 458ff.

8. So far as I know, the Indians never misemployed their salutes by using them all hours of the day like the Nazis.

9. See almost any number of LIFE and LOOK between 1940-1945 for photographs of characteristic salutes given en masse by Germans, Italians, Americans, British, French, Japanese, Russian, etc.

10. See Tomkins, Universal Indian Sign Language, p. 86, et sq. There are resemblances between Old Chinese and the picture-writing of several tribes of North American Indians. (Tchang Tcheng-Ming, L'Écriture chinoise et le geste humain); André Leroi-Gourhan, Le geste et la Parole Paris, Editions Albin Michel,22, Rue Huyghens, Vol. I, 1964; Vol. II, 1965. See especially Vol. I, Chap. VI.

11. See Logan P. Smith, Words and Idioms, London 2nd edition, 1925, especially p. 249ff., and appendix, p. 279-292.

12. These idioms are in the New Oxford English Dictionary without explanation. I suggest manual gestures as the origin.

13. This phrase is not necessarily 'self-explanatory', as can be seen when viewed from the Spaniard's viewpoint, for he says 'de un lado. . . de otro.'

14. In any large dictionary will be found idiomatic meanings under the words for hand, foot, arm, finger, nose, etc.

15. L. Baray and P. Chaslin, "Le Langage," in Traité de Psychologie, edited by G. Dumas, Paris, 1922, I, pp. 733-767. A. Ombredane, Le Langage, gesticulation significative mimique et conventionelle, ed. by G. Dumas, Paris, 1933, vol. 3, pp. 363-458.

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